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Studies in Rabbinic Hebrew

EDITED BY SHAI HEIJMANS

This volume presents a collection of articles centring on the language of the Mishnah and the Talmud — the most important Jewish texts (after the Bible), which were compiled in Palestine and Babylonia in the later centuries of Late Antiquity. Despite the fact that Rabbinic Hebrew has been the subject of growing academic interest across the past century, very little scholarship has been written on it in English. Studies in Rabbinic Hebrew addresses this lacuna, with eight lucid but technically rigorous articles written in English by a range of experienced scholars, focusing on various aspects of Rabbinic Hebrew: its phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics and lexicon. This volume is essential reading for students and scholars of Rabbinic studies alike, and appears in a new series, Studies in Semitic Languages and Cultures, in collaboration with the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge.

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6. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN BRANCHES OF RABBINIC HEBREW IN LIGHT OF THE HEBREW OF THE LATE MIDRASH

Yehonatan Wormser

The distinction between the two branches of Rabbinic Hebrew — the Palestinian branch and the Babylonian branch — has been well accepted from the very beginning of the modern study of Rabbinic Hebrew. Zacharias Frankel was probably the first to comment on this distinction, in 1859. More than fifty years later, in 1912, Jacob Nahum Epstein briefly mentioned this distinction as a known fact. In 1933, Harold Louis Ginsberg published a comprehensive study about it, and five years later Epstein introduced a detailed description of this subject in his monumental introduction to the text.

1 This paper is based on a research performed in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research of the Cairo Genizah of University of Haifa. I would like to express my deep thanks to Dr Moshe Lavee, head of the Centre, for his inspiring cooperation in this research. This research was also conducted with the support of the Russian Science Foundation (project no. 17-18-01295), Saint Petersburg State University.


3 Jacob N. Epstein, in his review article “Otsar Leshon ha-Mishnah” (in Hebrew), Hatequfah 13 (1912), pp. 503–516, at pp. 505–506.

of the Mishnah.\textsuperscript{5} Later scholars, such as Kutscher,\textsuperscript{6} Bendavid,\textsuperscript{7} Rosenthal,\textsuperscript{8} Bar-Asher,\textsuperscript{9} and Breuer,\textsuperscript{10} continued in this course, expanding and detailing the basic distinction. However, the latest developments in this domain, in which numerous details of this distinction have been questioned or proven wrong (that is to say, linguistic features which were considered characteristic only of one branch were also found in texts of the other branch), have blurred this distinction. The two most important scholars who have dealt with such cases are Friedman\textsuperscript{11} and Breuer.\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{enumerate}
\item In various studies, especially Yochanan Breuer, \textit{The Hebrew in the Babylonian Talmud according to the Manuscripts of Tractate Pesaḥîm} (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002).
\end{enumerate}
One of the features that has remained a fairly stable distinguishing feature up to present is the spelling of the conjunction אלא ‘but (rather)’: in Babylonian texts it is frequently (but not always) written with yod, אלא, while in Palestinian texts it is written with the standard defective spelling. The different spelling methods reflect different pronunciations: in the Land of Israel the vowel of the initial alef was probably the segol, but in Babylonia, according to the testimony of manuscripts with Babylonian vocalisation, along with Yemeni oral traditions, it was šere or hireq. The first to indicate this difference in spelling was probably Sokoloff, in a short comment in his doctoral dissertation. But the issue became widely known only a few years later, after Yeivin published a thorough study in which he examined the spelling of אלא and אילא in a wide range of different manuscripts. He introduced his conclusions very carefully,


emphasising that they were liable to necessitate revision on the basis of future manuscript research. Nevertheless, this distinction has been well accepted, even though, as we shall see, it has not always enjoyed complete confirmation in further findings. This acceptance was also strengthened by the parallel Aramaic dialects of the period: the form אילא is very common in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic texts, but in Palestinian Aramaic it occurs very rarely.

In this paper I would like to examine what can be learnt about this matter from texts of the well-known and widespread genre of the late Midrash, the Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu (TY) genre. TY literature, according to most studies, was created in the Land of Israel after the Amoraic period. Initially it included written summaries of oral sermons (derashot), which were compiled into unified collections. A few of those collections are known nowadays as the two editions of Tanḥuma (the ‘standard’ edition

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and Buber edition), *Shemot Rabbah, Bemidbar Rabbah* and *Devarim Rabbah* (two different editions). But it is clear that there were more TY editions, from which we have only remnants preserved in Cairo and European Genizah fragments, and in short quotations in *yalkutim* (medieval collections of Midrashim), while their full texts have been lost. As to its linguistic character, the Hebrew of TY literature reflects its Palestinian sources very clearly. Indeed, the Palestinian linguistic features were not equally preserved in all TY editions, and in at least a few of them, some of these features were considerably blurred.

From the perspective of the Palestinian linguistic features we can single out a group of Cairo Genizah fragments of lost TY editions, the Palestinian linguistic character of which is very clear and consistent in a manner not common in other TY texts. The Hebrew of these fragments is very similar to the Hebrew of the well-known early manuscripts of Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, like MS Kaufmann of the Mishnah and MS Vatican 30 of *Bereshit Rabbah*. For example, the famous Palestinian spelling of the final diphthong *-ay* with double *yod*

22 At the current state of the research, this group is known to contain nine fragments, remnants of four different editions. Two of those fragments (Cambridge University Library, T-S Misc.36.198 and T-S C1.46) were already recognised as good textual representatives of early Palestinian Hebrew (Mordechay Mishor, “Talmudic Hebrew in the Light of Epigraphy” (in Hebrew), *Mehqerei Lashon* 4 (1990), pp. 253–270, at p. 169; Bregman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature*, pp. 163–164). The other fragments are: Cambridge University Library T-S Misc.35–36.129; T-S C2.68; T-S C1.71; T-S C2.38; Or.1081 2.51; New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, ENA 3692.7 and ENA 691.18.
23 A comprehensive linguistic description of these fragments and a thorough discussion of their importance will be published in a separate study currently in preparation.
is consistently employed in those texts (e.g., ‘עלי’, ‘on me’, ‘my sons’ etc.), final nun frequently substitutes radical final mem (e.g., instead of ‘man, person’, meaning ‘like’), and consonantal alef is always omitted in certain words (e.g., in the name הלוע or in the construct שלוה, which is written הבו ‘as if’, which appears as בולא).

From this group, our main interest here is in one TY edition, which is represented in four Genizah fragments. The Palestinian linguistic character of this edition is obvious: except for the above-mentioned features, which all appear in those texts, we find here the extraordinary form כיויכול instead of כביכול ‘seemingly’. That is, a waw had substituted the bet, a well-known Palestinian spelling phenomenon. Other striking forms in these texts are the


27 New York, Jewish Theological Seminary ENA 3692.7; Cambridge University Library Or.1081 2.51; T-S C2.38; New York, JTS: ENA 691.18.

constructs ש and ש, meaning ‘that he’, ‘that she’. The elision of h is witnessed also in the equivalent form in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine period ד, shortened form of הדוהא, which frequently occurs in this dialect.  

Considering all these features, it seems beyond doubt that this text represents an original early Palestinian linguistic tradition.

There is only one feature in this text that seemingly contradicts this assumption — the spelling of אֵלָֿא, which occurs twenty-six times in the text, all of them in the ‘Babylonian’ form אֶלָֿא. Given the frequency, it cannot be explained as a scribe’s spelling mistake. It also cannot be assumed that yod was used as a vowel letter representing the vowel of segol in the initial alef — because yod is employed frequently in this text to represent sere, but it never comes with segol.

Rather we should raise the question, how did it come about that a typical Babylonian form appears in an otherwise Palestinian text? We are not able to provide a certain explanation, but there are three reasonable options: it could be an independent development in the Hebrew of the Land of Israel; it may be due to the influence of a foreign linguistic tradition; or the explanation might involve a combination of the two aforementioned options. According to the first alternative, it may be that the gemination of the lamed was simplified for some reason. The loss of gemination might then have brought about the lengthening of the preceding vowel, the segol. This lengthening could then have been realised as substitution of the segol by a sere: אֵלָֿא > אֶלָֿא > אֶלָּא, a common process in the Tiberian vocalization system.  

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30 Compare, for example, the form שְׁאָר ‘fire’ when a suffix is added: שְׁאֵר ‘your fire’. It seems probable that this is a natural phonetic shift, which
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option, since TY literature is considered a relatively late stratum of Rabbinic Hebrew, i.e., from after the Amoraic period, it is possible that when this text was written, the Babylonian Talmud and even Geonic literature had already reached an exclusive and authoritative position in the Jewish literary canon. In such a situation, the Babylonian linguistic tradition could have had an impact even in regions where the Palestinian traditions were practiced.

Whatever the reason behind this form, if we consider a few findings from Tannaitic Hebrew, its absolute attribution to the Babylonian branch seems quite dubious: Eldar and Yeivin have found a few occurrences of the form אֵלָא, vocalised with šere and without dagesh in Tiberian manuscripts; Eldar also commented on the occurrence of the spelling אֵילָא in MS Cambridge, Add.470.1 (widely known due the edition published by Lowe); Birnbaum found the form with šere in two Genizah fragments of the Mishnah, in which, according to his examination, there are no other signs of Babylonian influence on the language.


33 Prof. Yehudit Henshke notified me that it is found in this manuscript only once.


35 Yet, since we do not know exactly when those texts were written, we cannot conclude, at the current stage of research, that the form with šere or the spelling with yod have sources in the Palestinian Tannaitic Hebrew.
Furthermore, this spelling was found in other Genizah fragments of TY texts, side by side with Palestinian linguistic features (although the Palestinian linguistic character of those fragments is not as well-proven as it is in the case of the fragments discussed above). Hence, in Genizah fragment T-S Misc.36.125 we encounter the Palestinian forms חולם (i.e., ‘nobody’),37 ‘I will attack him’;38 in fragment T-S Misc.36.127 we find the aforementioned have already seen the forms כלים and prise, and similarly in fragment JTS ENA.2365.69 we find the name לעזר and the final double yod spelling לפניי ‘in front of me’; this spelling is also employed in a fragment from Oxford, MS heb. C. 18/11, in the word גנוי (i.e., ‘disgrace’, where we also witness the defective form כפת in the phrase המ כפת לך (i.e., מה כפסת לך) ‘what do you care?’, which is known from Jewish Palestinian Aramaic as well.39 The form אינא appears in all these fragments. This form, therefore, may no longer be considered a feature exclusively distinctive of Babylonian Rabbinic Hebrew, especially when we consider the Hebrew of TY literature.

This conclusion about אינא leads us to sharpen a more valid fundamental approach to the distinction between the two


38 On this form see Sokoloff, “The Hebrew of Bereshit Rabba”, pp. 144–148; Wormser, “On Some Features”, p. 201. I have left untranslated the verb נס铧, because it is employed here not in its regular meaning ‘stand’, but as an auxiliary verb; compare, for example, the phrase נסואר נברח מפניהם ‘we will run away from them’ (Midrash Tanhuma, ed. Buber, p. 67).

39 Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, p. 58.
branches. We actually find ourselves in line with the attitude advocated by Bendavid more than fifty years ago:  

Now, after detailing hundreds of tiny differences between the Palestinian version and the Babylonian version, it is advisable to qualify our words and resist an overly schematic division. In reality, there is no clear Palestinian or Babylonian type. The literature of the sages of the Land of Israel abounded in Babylon for generations, and the formulation of their sayings was sometimes precisely and sometimes less precisely preserved. [...] There is but a difference of proportions between the two types — Palestinian and Babylonian — (linguistic) features occurring frequently (in one branch), rarely (in the other branch).

It seems that this view has not gained sufficient attention among researchers of Rabbinic Hebrew, who, in many cases, have tended to attribute linguistic features only to one branch, ignoring or objecting to the possibility of their presence in the other branch. In my opinion, the distinction between Palestinian Hebrew and Babylonian Hebrew should most often be regarded as a relative rather than absolute distinction. Bendavid pointed to the influence of the sages of the Land of Israel on Babylonian Jews, but, as a matter of fact, the influence was mutual. There was continual interaction between the two communities during the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods and thereafter, with scholars travelling or migrating from one country to the other. By this

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40 Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew*, p. 221; in Hebrew: עתה, לאחר פירוט מאה ההבדליםodusריים שבין Nesht HaArzi Nesht habal, ראינו שיש לתבר Electronics.tw formal time, álbum נסח בלשון בבל, ארץ שית סים לעברינה ולא ימב תפרידה סכימתית יותר מידי. לאяхנה של חיבור לא בן מתא תוסס ארץ ישראלי, מבוקד ולא בל מובק. וברים על ההבדל ארץ ישראלי יונה השפעת בלבל כיordan, Nesht ברדר שני נשמות ברייקס נועים שלמה כהוקן [...] על בין שני התווספות, הארץ-ישראלי והבבל, אלא הפרש פופולרי, באיתו יש מורה או nâng מהומות.

41 For examples and discussion on this approach, see Friedman, “An Ancient Scroll Fragment”, pp. 12–16; idem, “The Manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud”, pp. 166–175, 178–182. The conclusion presented below correlates to a large extent with Friedman’s approach.
way, customs and traditions incessantly moved from one place to the other.\(^{42}\) Accordingly, the linguistic traditions of both areas have a few common phenomena, in which the Palestinian and the Babylonian Amoraic layer developed a new character, different from the Tannaitic layer.\(^{43}\) It is likely that, in many cases, even the written texts moved from one place to another, and continued to be edited in their new location. The result of such cases is a kind of combination of the different traditions, as may have happened, according to Epstein’s assumption,\(^ {44} \) in a few manuscripts that were written in the Land of Israel, but vocalised in Babylon.\(^ {45} \)

Therefore, we should rarely if ever expect to find a criterion on the basis of which it is possible absolutely to distinguish between the branches. Whenever an apparently distinctive feature is

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\(^ {43}\) Breuer, *Pesahim*, pp. 11–12.


\(^ {45}\) In most cases it is probably impossible to determine whether the fusion of traditions represents testimony authentic of living Hebrew, i.e., the language of an author of a rabbinic text as an actual representation of a Palestinian or Babylonian tradition, or just late corruptions introduced by a copyist. The reason for the importance of the findings presented here is that the main text discussed is clearly an original text of the Palestinian tradition, so the assumption that the appearance of אילא here is an original feature seems very reasonable.
identified, it should be remembered that any characteristic of
the Hebrew of one branch may appear, to one degree or another,
in the other branch. Recognition of this fact does not entail
rejecting the fundamental concept of the linguistic distinction
between the two branches. It just puts it in its right perspective.

If this view is accepted, we should abandon any attempt to
find a single criterion to determine the type of a particular text,
as Yeivin proposed regarding the form אִילָא.47

A manuscript in which this word is written only in defective spelling
is probably a Palestinian manuscript. Indeed, it is not absolute
evidence, because there are also a few Babylonian manuscripts in
which this word is written only defectively, and therefore, despite
this spelling, it is possible that this is a Babylonian manuscript. On
the other hand, a manuscript in which the plene spelling is found,
constantly or occasionally, is certainly a Babylonian manuscript.

In conclusion, we have pointed out the fact that the form אִילָא,
which is considered a characteristic of the Babylonian branch
of Rabbinic Hebrew, is also found in texts that belong to the
Palestinian tradition. It seems that this tendency intensified after
the Amoraic period, in the Hebrew of TY. There are two possible
reasons for this situation: it may be an independent development
in Palestinian Hebrew or, alternatively, a result of Babylonian
influence on the Palestinian branch. Whatever the reason, the fact
is that a characteristically Babylonian form has come to be found,
however rarely, in the Palestinian tradition. But according to our

46 Needless to say, those Babylonian features that originated in the Land
of Israel (see Kutscher, “Mibe‘ayot ha-milonut”, p. 41; Bar-Asher, “The
Different Traditions of Mishnaic Hebrew”, pp. 205–218) are very likely to
have left at least sporadic traces in Palestinian Hebrew.
47 Yeivin, “Ketivah shel tevat אִילָא”, p. 258: כותב יד שבי התיבה בתוחה בתוחת תפר
בלבד מ(Db)מבר לשארכי-שראלי, או. א民办 שמיים גח תוב -, בבליל אִילָא ש僉ה
התיבה בתוחת בתוחת תפר בלבד, או בר כותב תוחת נ(grad)ות, ומשאר שייא על פי כותב-ד-ה
בליל יהל; מדר אﲟ, כותב-ד-شبه פימי בתוחת המלם, חמיד ואפריקי — דאם בבליל יהל.
proposal — namely, that one should regard the fundamental
distinction between the two branches always as a relative rather
than absolute distinction — our findings about אילא in no way
stand in opposition to its Babylonian attribution: the form אילא is
typical of Babylonian Rabbinic Hebrew and appears occasionally
in the Palestinian Rabbinic Hebrew.